DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 253 935 EA 017 510

AUTHOR Hansen, Kenneth H.
TITLE Megatrends in American Society: Policy Issues for State Education Agencies. An Issues Analysis Paper. Discussion Draft.
INSTITUTION Northwest Regional Educational Lab., Portland, OR. Northwest Center for State Educational Policy Studies.
SPONS AGENCY Chief State School Officers of the Northwest and Pacific.
PUB DATE Jun 83
NOTE 14p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Cost Effectiveness; Educational Innovation; *Educational Policy; *Educational Trends; Elementary Secondary Education; *Futures (of Society); Politics of Education; Retrenchment; *State Departments of Education; State School District Relationship; Technical Assistance; *Trend Analysis
IDENTIFIERS *Megatrends; Naisbitt (John); United States (Northwest)

ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to match identified large-scale social trends (derived from the popular book "Megatrends" by John Naisbitt) to possible state education agency (SEA) policy positions. The first part of the analysis explores possible implications of these "megatrends" for SEA policy development. The trends discussed show America moving: (1) from an industrial society to an information society; (2) from "force technology" to "high tech/high touch" society; (3) from a national economy to regional economies, with strong global overtones; (4) from a centralized to a decentralized society; (5) from a representative democracy to a participatory democracy; (6) from a hierarchical to a network society; and (7) from an "either-or" to a "multiple options" society. The second part of the analysis considers whether the educational policies that these megatrends might suggest are feasible in a time of limited or declining resources. Possible responses by SEAs that account for declining resources and are also in keeping with these megatrends include limits on regulation and reporting, decentralization of authority, expanded technical assistance, promotion of best practices, and expanded use of electronic communication networks. (TE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED253935

EA

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF EDUCATION
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official NIE position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
M. Margaret Rogers
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

MEGATRENDS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: POLICY ISSUES FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

An Issues Analysis Paper

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

Kenneth H. Hansen
Principal Author

Northwest Center for State Educational Policy Studies
Northwest Regional Educational Laboratory
300 S.W. Sixth Avenue
Portland, Oregon 97204

June 1983

EA 017 510

MEGATRENDS IN AMERICAN SOCIETY: POLICY ISSUES FOR STATE EDUCATION AGENCIES

A. Introduction

The megatrend concept. Persons who deal professionally with the future, forecasting its likely characteristics and how they will affect individuals and society, have devised an intriguing term to describe major groupings of trends which they have discerned: "megatrends." So new and impressive is this term that it has sometimes been accepted without being examined.

Megatrends are, by design, inclusive and comprehensive, large-scale and long-range. While they are forward-looking, they are by no means "futuristic," in the sense of being merely speculative--they are not wild-eyed scenarios of what's to come, but sober assessments of what is likely to occur. Because these assessments ultimately represent the differing opinions and interpretations of a variety of scholars, the consensus finally achieved in designating some important thrust as a "megatrend" may actually gloss over important differences of opinion which are held by individual thinkers who contibuted to the definition and articulation of the megatrend.

Uses and limitations. Since megatrends, no matter how solidly based in research, are points of view, they necessarily must be used as points of reference, not as revealed "truth." Though usually strongly buttressed by relevant data, they are not "proved"; they are intended to be understood as perceived directions which society seems to be taking, not as flat predictions of what will happen.

Therefore, megatrends need not be accepted as inevitable; it is quite legitimate to resist an identified "trend." Since a large-scale and long-range trend may not apply to a particular segment of society or in a particular situation, it may not match one's own best guess. So, in this attempt to match the identified social megatrends to possible SEA policy positions, each application may well be prefaced with an implied (if not explicit) precautionary statement, "Assuming this trend to be real . . ."

With these clarifications and cautions in mind, however, the megatrend concept can be an extremely useful framework both for policy planning and for action. Using one widely publicized set of identified megatrends, taken from the popular book, MEGATRENDS, by John Naisbitt, this analysis will, first, explore some of their possible impacts on SEA policy development and, second, will consider whether the educational policies which these megatrends might suggest are feasible in a time of limited/declining resources.

B. Possible Impacts on SEA Policy

Below are listed, in capsule form, seven megatrends which describe some of the directions in which our society is thought to be moving. (Although the Naisbitt study contained a list of ten megatrends, only the seven having particular salience for education are considered here.) What can they suggest for SEA policy?

1. From an industrial society to an information society. Whether or not the popular term "information society" is entirely an accurate one, it does provide a useful concept--and suggests some possible educational policy considerations. For example, it is sometimes assumed that an "information society" is one in which the main educational demand will be for persons equipped to use this great body of information, and

especially to handle it by electronic means. This is true, but it doesn't go far enough. There will continue to be need for the development of policies which promote an educational system which supplies not only users but also producers of knowledge and information--hence the continued need not only for basic skills, but also an enhanced level of competency in higher-order thinking.

In curriculum, for example, there may well be a need for emphasis not only on the electronic handling of information, but on the intellectual understanding of the importance of that information: its credibility, its worth, and its significance in moral and social, as well as intellectual, terms. "Computer literacy," thus conceived, takes on a whole new set of dimensions and responsibilities.

The growth of the information society will mean the likelihood of significant changes in the way the SEA itself operates: management policies will have to be devised to take advantage of the wealth of available data for educational planning and decision making.

Finally, although our society may well be (or on the way to becoming) an "information" society, it still operates in a service economy. Thus, the continued need for a very wide variety in our schools of "vocational" education and orientation beyond that commonly associated with an information society.

2. From "force technology" to "high-tech/high-touch" society. This is an identified megatrend which presents at the outset a couple of problems: the definition of the terms themselves and the identification of the elements of the trend which have implications for educational policy making.

The terms used in the Naisbitt list of megatrends simply refer to the shift from the more or less brute-force technologies of heavy industrial processing and manufacturing to the more sophisticated technological industries which dominate the industrial picture today--with a somewhat whimsical note that the affective ("high-touch") areas are also of increasing importance in the technological society.

The implications of this megatrend are not, it must be admitted, of specifically educational nature, but there are some discernible relationships. First of all, such a trend very clearly--even forcefully--calls for an educational system which is by design (i.e., as a matter of conscious educational policy) committed to the preservation of the humane ideal in both curriculum and instruction. Furthermore, again as a matter of conscious policy, learning and social development in the schools must be seen in terms of something other than an industrial factory-production setting, an assembly-line system which pays scant attention to the individual and which ignores the values of learning as a social enterprise. For any technological society carries with it the danger of mechanism and depersonalization, trends which must be resisted and countered by the schools. And there seems to be no doubt that there are peculiar stresses and demands upon the individual which come from living in a technological society. These problems, too, the policies of the educational system must directly address.

3. From a national economy to regional economies, with strong global overtones. Recognition of this as a clearly discernible trend is not difficult, given the obvious faltering of the traditional monolithic "smokestack" industries, the rise of such phenomena as the Sunbelt location of many manufacturing and assembling firms, and such narrowly

regionalized high-tech industrial areas as the Silicon Valley. The crucial importance of global trade is clearly seen in the rise of Japanese imports, especially autombiles and electronic products. But what do these economic and trade developments have to do with educational policy?

There are several significant implications. There will almost surely have to be, as a matter of crucially important educational policy, much closer cooperation with business and industry in planning vocational education to meet the demands for skilled or readily trainable manpower in regional job markets--a local problem, to be sure, but one requiring also statewide and interstate planning and programming. Because of the necessity for understanding the significance of global trade, and the inadequeacy of traditional protectionist answers to international trade competition, a great deal of curricular emphasis will have to be given to expanding international understanding and developing concepts of global thinking. Increased foreign language offerings, again as a matter of fundamental state educational policy, will appear to be a necessity--with strong consideration being given to regionally specialized offerings, such as those appropriate to the Pacific Rim states where trade with the Asian nations is of such increasing importance.

4. <u>From a centralized to a decentralized society</u>. Perhaps the identification of this megatrend needs to be accepted with some caution, because not all of the evidence points in the single direction of "decentralization." Nevertheless, there is certainly enough reason to believe in the strength of the decentralization movement to argue for the consideration of SEA policies which decrease centrally imposed requirements to be met by local school districts. Instead, there will

probably be needed an increasing emphasis on technical assistance and staff development to improve LEA capabilities to make decisions and to solve problems at the local level--"capacity building" is a popular and appropriate term for this type of activity.

For example, there seems to be less appetite today for the development of state-level curriculum guides and the imposition of detailed "standards" on local schools. It must be added quickly, of course, that the situation may be vastly different in different states, and that the belief in state-level centralization remains strong in certain areas. But the decentralization trend does seem to be a marked one, extending down to the local level.

Developing at the local level is a strong belief that there should be more autonomy right at the school site: if there is to be strong principal leadership, highly motivated, self-directive teachers, and extensive community and parental input, decentralization at the local level is a necessity.

A decentralized society may require some curricular adjustments as well. There would seem to be a need, for example, for educational policies strongly supported at the state level which call for vigorous curricular emphasis on building the individual student's sense of responsibility for his own decisions and actions. Not only curriculum, but instructional strategies as well, may need to reflect the fundamental move away from a centralized to a decentralized society, so that students are early encouraged by the way they are taught that they are necessarily key participants in devising their society and conducting their own lives.

5. <u>From representative democracy to participatory democracy</u>. Insofar as this trend describes the shift toward greater involvement of

persons affected by a decision in the making of that decision, most boards of education, state or local, would find themselves in agreement with the trend, both in theory and in practice. Most educational policy-making bodies believe that all persons affected--students and parents, other taxpayers, teachers and administrators, and special-interest groups--should be consulted in the process of educational decision making. In actual practice, this form of participatory democracy is increasingly common.

But the other aspect of the trend--not only reported by the Naisbitt Group but supported by them with almost missionary zeal--raises a serious policy issue for boards of education. Naisbitt maintains that representative democracy as we have known it is obsolete--that all important decisions should be made by the "participatory" processes of initiative and referendum. If carried to the extreme which seems to be advocated, boards of education would "represent" their constituencies only on minor items of educational and practical insignificance. On important matters, "the people" would vote directly.

There seems to be a flaw in the reasoning which assumes that a representative process is less "democratic" than one which depends on the direct vote of the people. A representative body, such as a board of education, can perform functions which the individual voter is ill equipped to undertake. A board of education, for example, operating at its most effective level, brings to the decision-making process judgment that is full informed, deliberate, balanced, and long-range.

By contrast, those engaging in the "participatory democracy" of the initiative process are much more likely to be ill informed, hasty in

making judgment, inclined to a single-issue advocacy, and short-range in outlook.

The initiative (before-the-fact) and the referendum (after-the-fact) are, indeed, important tools of the particiatory democratic process, and should be preserved and encouraged for appropriate use. It would appear, however, that if the trend toward more participatory democracy means the demise of the representative board system of educational decision making and governance, perhaps this is one trend which should meet with firm resistance.

If greater "accountability" to "the public" is needed, the public can always rely on the venerable principle of American politics: throw the rascals out!

6. From a hierarchical to a network society. This megatrend, which is comparatively easy both to identify and to verify empirically, would seem to call for educational policies which promote more intense effort on the part of the SEA to share planning and decision making with LEAs, a move which fortunately is well under way in many states. But such a shift toward greater collegiality is more than a matter of stated intent: it involves using both specialized (subject matter, special interest) and inclusive (whole group) networks at state and local levels to accomplish the desired objectives. Networks for goal-based education, networks to advance the instructionally effective schools, networks to critique computer software--these are but a few examples of how the nonhierarchical system can work if it is the policy to make it work.

Now that a rich and extensive variety of educational data bases are more complete and accessible, sharing common data among local school

districts and between local and state levels for defining problems and projecting possible solutions is a very real possibility--again, if given strong policy support from the state level.

7. From an "either-or" to a "multiple-options" society. Although this megatrend actually runs counter to the current moves toward more uniform educational standards (curriculum patterns, graduation requirements, and college entrance requirements, for example) and thus may have to be resisted in part, the trend itself is both inescapable and worthwhile. To go along with and resist a trend all at the same time may seem to present an impossible choice, but carefully formulated policies may provide a way to do just that.

For example, a state's educational policies may stipulate very firm educational principles and goals, but provide many optional routes to the desired achievements. Varied bases for school accreditation have proved to be feasible; certification requirements can be met in alternative ways; alternative schools and alternative programs within a single school can all be held to the same rigorous standards and lead to the accomplishment of tho same high goals.

It is becoming quite clear that educational policies must provide accommodation to multiple types of providers of different kinds of educational experience, providing parent and child with multiple options from which to choose the desired schooling.

There is an interrelation here also with a previously discussed trend, that to a more decentralized society. As was noted with the decentralization trend, there seems here also a call for educational polcies which require curricular and instructional emphasis on students'

having experience in selecting among available choices and making decisions, to fit them for better participation in a multiple-options society.

C. Responsive Policy in a Time of Limited/Declining Resources

If there is one megatrend which SEAs could agree on without hesitation (though with great regret) it would be this: money is getting scarcer, and is likely to get scarcer yet. Shrinkage of resources may be the SEAs biggest megatrend!

It is only fair, then, to ask a basic question: is it reasonable to expect any significant SEA response to the social and economic megatrends which have been identified, given the difficult financial conditions under which these educational organizations must today operate? In partial response to this question, it may be appropriate to note that while declining resources are not to be desired or applauded, this decline may actually be a part of the megatrends themselves. The decline in resources available to education is not totally inconsistent with some of the major trends: decentralization, multiple options, accountability, networking, the use of electronic technologies. Not that there is a definite cause and effect relationship, but that the decline in resources and the other megatrends are not unrelated.

Under these conditions, it may be worthwhile to examine policy options which might provide for certain trend sensitive changes in state education policy.

Limited regulation and reporting. Without additional expense--at some saving, in fact--SEAs may wish to respond to the general tenor of

the megatrends by consciously limiting the amount of state regulation imposed on LEAs and the reporting required of them.

Decentralization of authority. Assigning to LEAs more responsibility and authority for determining how they will meet necessary state requirements and accomplish state-level education objectives might be another no/low cost shift in state educational policy which would be responsive to a number of the megatrends.

Expanded "capacity building." If the SEA is to respond to the megatrends which emphasize decentralization, multiple options, local accountability, and a less hierarchical social and educational system, there would be a concomitant state responsibility to help the local districts build the capacity to take on new responsibilities. Providing additional technical assistance and expanded staff development opportunities would be admittedly a somewhat costly venture, but perhaps other economies stemming from decentralization would balance out this expense.

SEA promotion of best practices. Constant emphasis on and promotion of best practice--what really works--would not require a policy shift, but merely an intensifying of emphasis. Best practices in electronic instructional technology, in utilizing the effective schooling research, in developing vocational programs in concert with business and industry--all of these would represent appropriate responses to the megatrends, and none of them represents vast expenditures of "new" money.

Expanded use of electronic communication networks. A most appropriate response to the needs of an increasingly high-tech information society operating on a network basis would be the expanded use of electronic communication networks. Making information sources

from data-base networks quickly available in usable form may quite possibly represent one of the least costly ways of "doing business" with local education agencies.

SUMMARY

The "megatrend" concept--and the specific megatrends identified by any one group of futurists--may not be totally convincing, but undoubtedly it provides a useful framework for rethinking state education policy. Rethinking policy is always a worthwhile exercise, but there is little in the megatrend concept which would suggest that state educational policy necessarily needs radical revision or a massive infusion of new funding. While it is always dangerous to suggest that the schools can do a better job with less money, it can be rationally argued that even if we don't have the fiscal resources we really need, we can rearrange our educational priorities, refine our goals, and revamp our instructional procedures to do a better job with what we have.